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“I CAN’T MAKE MYSELF DIFFERENT.”

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN A MINISTER AND ONE OF HIS FLOCK.

Minister. And now, as we have got through our business, Mr. C., let us turn to something more important. I was glad to see you at church last Sunday; now you have come once, I hope you will come regularly.

C. Well, I don’t know, sir; I liked all I heard very well, but I don’t see any use in going unless one’s heart is in it.

Min. And is not your heart in it?

C. No, I can’t say it is. I won’t deceive you, sir; but I don’t feel drawn that way, and I see no use in trying till I am. I can’t make myself different. You said yourself in your sermon, “A man can’t change his own heart.”

Min. And I say so again; none but the Holy Spirit can do that. But why keep away on that account?

C. Because, as I am now, I have no heart in it, and I don’t see the use of going. Excuse me, sir, if I speak plainly, but that’s the truth.

Min. I am glad you do speak plainly, because then I can speak plainly too. Mr. C., do you ever pray?

C. Not very often.

Min. Why not?

C. For the same reason—because I seem to have no heart for prayer. If I kneel down, I don’t feel as if I was in earnest; and I am sure it is no use praying without.

Min. No, that is very true. But why not ask God to make you in earnest?

C. I can’t ask God for anything as I am now, because I don’t really feel the wish; and I can’t *make* myself wish.

Min. Now, I think you are going too far. You say you don’t feel the wish—what wish?

C. Why, the wish to be different from what I am, for I know I am not in a good way now. But it's no use talking, sir; I hope it will come some day, and it's no good trying, or praying, or anything else, till it does.

Min. Did you ever try in earnest?

C. I don't know that I ever did. I know it's of no use.

Min. You were laid up with the rheumatism some time ago, were you not?

C. It was the lumbago, and very bad I was with it. I didn't leave the house for six weeks.

Min. Well, now, you are a cabinet-maker, and I have heard you say you don't get much to do. I was down at the docks this morning, and Mr. W. took me over his large new ship, that is to be launched next week. I found your neighbor over the way, Mr. H., there fitting up the captain's cabin; he had several men at work besides himself, for the cabin is all to be lined with mahogany, and there is all the furniture to be fitted to it besides. Mr. H. has been at it for several weeks, and says it is the best job he has had all the year. You would have liked to have it, wouldn't you? Only the order came just when you were laid up.

C. Oh! I'd have managed it somehow, if Mr. W. had given me the job: but no such luck comes in my way. Why, sir, Mr. H. will make thirty pounds by it, if he makes a penny. I'd have gone on my hands and knees rather than lose such a chance; trust me, I'd have got down to the docks fast enough, lumbago and all.

Min. I have no doubt you would. At all events you would have tried; though, before, you thought you could not stir a step. Now, just let us go back to what we were talking of. You say you do not try because you are sure it's of no use.

C. Ah! I see what you are driving at, sir. But the two things are not alike. I should have *wanted* to get that job at the ship, but I *don't* want the other. I don't feel any desire, I'm not in earnest—and I must wait till I am.

Min. But, on your own showing, it is more "I won't" than "I can't." You say you are not in earnest—do you wish you were?

C. Yes, I should be glad to feel different, certainly.

Min. Are you quite sure of that?

(No answer.)

Because, to speak plainly, I am not, if *you* are. Don't be offended with me for saying so, but I do not think you really wish to be different from what you are. On your own showing, wouldn't you try, if you did? It is not that you *can't*, but you *won't*. I cannot believe that a man who would hobble down to the wharf-side, all crippled and in pain, just to get a thirty pound job, would sit still and say "It's no use trying," if he really wished to be a different man. Why, only set one thing against the other: on the one hand, a good job of work; on the other, the salvation of your soul — for it comes to that. No, Mr. C., you are not in earnest, your heart is not set toward God, and you don't wish it to be. You have no real care for your soul, or how could you sit still and let it take its chance for eternity, and coolly say, "I can't make myself different, it's no use trying?" Now, am I too hard on you, or is this the truth?

Mr. C. made no reply.

I have no wish to be hard on you, but I do think you are not awake to the preciousness of your soul. Your *will* is in fault — you said so yourself: but the evil lies even deeper than you think; your heart and will are altogether wrong. Oh, how differently you would speak and act if you were convinced of sin, and brought to feel your soul's need! Now, I want to show you that this change of will (in other words, a new heart) is what God has promised to give, and, therefore, the very thing you should pray for: in all you have told me of your feelings, there is nothing but what God has foreseen and provided for. But I will not do it in my own words. I see a Bible on the shelf, just give it to me, and bring your chair to mine, and let us look at a few passages together; and may God teach our hearts by his spirit.

Mr. C. still said nothing, but the Bible was brought, and they sat side by side and the minister opened the sacred book, and as he did so his heart was lifted up in prayer, that he might be led to suitable passages, and that the word might be blessed by the Spirit.

First, I want to show you that man's will is by nature

corrupt and disinclined to God; so that it is no wonder that you, or any one else, feel no heart for spiritual things. At the very beginning of the Bible we find this—"And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."* That was before the flood. But, ages after, we find man no better; here, in the prophesy of Jeremiah, it is said, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked"† And if we turn to the New Testament, we shall find something plainer and stronger still. Here, for instance—"The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."‡

C. I don't want to interrupt you, sir, but all this is nothing new to me. I have told you all along that I don't feel any interest in these things, so it doesn't surprise me to find it said so in the Bible.

Min. But suppose I can show you that this very thing is spoken of in the Bible as a *fault*, and a thing which man might help if he chose. Look here, for instance—"They will not frame their doings to turn unto their God;"§ this is God's complaint against Israel: not, you see, that they *cannot*, but that they *will not*. And there is a remarkable verse at the end of the same chapter, which you ought to lay to heart—"I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face." You say you must wait till God changes you, but here he seems to say *he* will wait till you seek him; did you ever notice that verse?

C. I don't know that I ever did.

Min. Well, don't forget it; you know, you must not take one part of scripture and leave another. Now, look at this verse in the Psalms—"The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God. God is not in all his thoughts."|| There is often pride in us where we do not suspect it. Perhaps, after all, it is pride that keeps you from seeking God. And now,

* Gen. vi, 5.

‡ Hos. v, 4.

† Jer. xvii, 9.

|| Psalm x, 4.

‡ 1 Cor. ii, 14.

once more, turn to the words of the Lord Jesus himself: this is his complaint against the Jews — "And ye *will* not come to me, that ye might have life."* What could any plain, honest man think from these words, but that the Jews *might* have come if they *would*? And is it not just the same with *you*? Ah! Mr. C., perhaps the Lord Jesus says of *you* that you will not come to Him that you might have life; perhaps this is his complaint against *you*, that though he has died that you might live, and though he has called you to him again and again, yet you will not come, but only cavil at his words like those hard-hearted Jews, and reason about whether you can come or not, instead of taking him at his word and coming. Let me ask you one thing: Do you think God would invite us to come to him, if he knew we could not? And if God has promised, in answer to prayer, to take away our unwillingness, and dispose us to seek him, does this not take away all excuse?

C. It does seem so, indeed. But I cannot even pray as I ought, and I believe no one can until it is given him.

Min. I believe if you really wished for the thing you *would* pray, without stopping to think whether you could or not. But, granting that no one can pray aright till it is given him (which I believe as much as you do), my answer is that God *will* give it. That disciple must have felt he could not pray, who said, "Lord, teach us to pray."† Whether it was want of inclination or want of knowledge he felt (I suppose it was the latter), it makes no difference in the argument; he wanted *help* to pray, and asked for it; and Jesus granted his request. It is one of the offices of the Holy Spirit to help in prayer — "Likewise, the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."‡ Words could not speak plainer. We have infirmities about prayer — not you only, but all of us; and not all the same, but one this and another that. And God knows this far better than we do, and has provided for it: the Holy Spirit helps

* John v, 40.

† Luke xi, 1.

‡ Rom. viii, 26.

us ; brings us into a fit state of mind, makes us to wish for right things, warms our desires, puts thoughts and feelings into us, and helps us in our very words. You are not the only man in want of this help ; I want it too, and often seek it ; and, Mr. C., whenever I have been enabled freely and fully to lay my wants before God, I am well aware who it is that has helped me ; it has not been my own doing alone.

But there is one thing I want to bring you to still. I wish to show you clearly that God has promised to give a new heart ; in other words, to make people different from what they were—the very thing you say you cannot do for yourself. Listen to this — “ And I will give them an heart to know me, that I am the Lord ; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God : for they shall return unto me with their whole heart.”* There are three or four more passages to the same effect.

It is true these promises were made to Israel. But, in the first place, there never was a more rebellious people, so that a promise made to *them* is full of encouragement to others. And in the next place, Israel is an example to us, and God’s dealings with them a pattern of his dealings with us.† But there is another promise, made not to Israel only, but to all : “ If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children : how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him ?”‡ To *them* ; that is, to all that ask him ; to *you*, Mr. C., if you ask him. You could not have a promise more suited to your case ; if ever your heart is to be changed, it must be by the Holy Spirit, and here the Holy Spirit is promised if you ask. But I have stayed much longer than I meant, and fear I have taken up your time, and tired you besides.

C. Pray say nothing about that, sir ; I have not anything particular to do, and I ’d rather hear all.

Min. Well, then, I will just show you one instance of such prayer as I wish you to make ; it is this — “ Turn thou me, and I shall be turned ; for thou art the

* Jer. xxiv, 7. See also Jer. xxxi, 33 ; xxxii, 39 ; Ezek. xi, 19, 20 ; xxxvi, 26, etc.

† 1 Cor. x, 11.

‡ Luke xi, 13.

Lord my God."* Now, here is exactly the prayer for you; because it not only asks for what you want, but asks in *faith*, expressing a belief that God both can and will do it. Tell me, do you think God is able to turn your heart to himself?

C. Yes, I do.

Min. And do you believe he is willing?

(No answer.)

Why should you doubt it? He has *told* you so; he has shown it by sparing you to the present time; he has given you many examples of it. Think of the parable of the prodigal son,† meant to show God's willingness to receive the returning sinner; remember how, "when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him," and would hardly let him acknowledge his fault, so ready was he to forgive. If such is the way God receives the returning sinner, can you think he will refuse to help him to return? And think of that verse in the 8th chapter of Romans—there is a world of argument in it—"He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"‡ He that gave his Son, will he withhold his *grace*? Then why not pray, "Turn thou me," believing that he both *can* and *will*? Don't argue about it, but just take God at his word; pray upon his promise, upon his power, upon his love. Don't you remember the case of the man with the withered hand? It was crippled so that he could not use it, but Jesus said to him: stretch forth thine hand: and he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other."§ How could that be? Doubtless, because, in the very act of trying to obey, he received *power* to obey. What if he had said, "I can't, it's no use trying?" Ah! Mr. C., your heart is like his hand, but the power that healed the one can change the other. He who said "Stretch forth thine hand," says to you, "Believe, pray, turn." Only do as the man with the withered hand did—*try*, in simple dependence on him who commands, and God will give you the power.

* Jer. xxxi, 18. † Luke xv, 11-32. ‡ Rom. viii, 32. § Matt. 12, 13.

There is one more piece of advice I will give you: don't have a "but" ready for all occasions. You have a deadly enemy, who will do all he can to keep you from God: and if he can but make you argue and dispute, instead of praying, his end is gained. Your favorite answer, "I can't make myself different," though in one sense true, is of his framing; just as, when he dared to tempt our Lord himself, he did it with words of scripture.

I hope you will not forget our conversation. This is no speculative subject, but a matter of life and death. Pray for a change of heart. If you cannot pray, ask that the Spirit may help your infirmity. If you feel little *desire*, even ask for more. You may be all that you say, indifferent and unconcerned, with no taste for spiritual things, and no heart for prayer—you then, of all others, should pray, because you need so much. If no other prayer comes to your mind, at least you can say, "Lord teach me to pray; help my infirmity; make me in earnest." I hope the hand of God was in it, that, when I came here to-day on business, we were led into this conversation. If ever you want such help as I can give, come to me without scruple, and we will talk over these things again, and search the Scriptures together. It is my heart's desire for you, that you may be really concerned for your soul, and be led to flee to Christ as one in earnest for salvation. Before I go, let us kneel down and pray.

They did so, and when they rose from their knees, Mr. C.'s face wore a serious and softened expression, and he thanked the minister for his visit: and so they parted.

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